

Distress, Urgency and Safety calls.

On Tuesday, September 29th two men were rescued from the Gulf of Mexico after their boat caught fire and sank 14 miles off Casey Key.

I was listening to VHF-FM Ch. 16, the distress and hailing frequency at the time and heard the initial calls to the U.S. Coast Guard. I recall something like Coast Guard, Coast Guard! There is a fire out in the Gulf! After the Coast Guard radio watch stander in St. Petersburg responded to the caller, a rapid exchange of information took place to identify the position of the fire.

My compliments to the search and rescue personnel and first responders as well as the good samaritans who responded to this incident so quickly. Two boaters will be able to ponder their misadventure and imagine what might have been.

In listening to the radio transmissions throughout the afternoon and now reflecting on the events of the day, I doubt the two boaters had much time to use their own marine radio to call for help.

If your vessel is in distress, you may use any means available such as flags, flares, lights or audible signal such as horn, bells or whistle in addition to your marine radio to attract attention. As in the situation above, a significant plume of smoke had appeared on the horizon and got someone's attention. Although I am sure the boat owner would rather have used some other signal instead of his burning boat for this purpose.

If you have enough time to use your marine radio, there are three spoken emergency signals. MAYDAY, PAN – PAN pronounced (PAHN – PAHN) and SECURITY pronounced (SAY-CUR-EETAY). They show the degree of severity of the emergency. Distress and Urgency are given on Ch. 16. Safety messages are announced on Ch. 16 and given on a working channel.

The distress signal – MAYDAY precedes a distress message about a grave and immediate danger and request for immediate help. MAYDAY has a priority over all other calls. If you use this spoken signal, speak the word three times, "MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY". If your message is being received on CH. 16, do not risk changing channels during the emergency unless asked to do so by the U.S. Coast Guard.

After the initial contact, the following message sequence should be broadcast, speaking slowly and distinctly. MAYDAY spoken three times, this is (vessel name) spoken three times, then MAYDAY spoken once and your vessel name spoken once. Next is the position of your vessel given in latitude and longitude or bearing and distance from a well known land mark. Next is the nature of your distress, for example taking on water, fire or medical emergency; the kind of help needed and any other information that might help

such as a description of your vessel, the number of passengers on board and if any need medical attention. When you are through say I will be listening on Ch. 16. End your message by saying this is (vessel's name) OVER. Someone should answer. If you do not receive a response, repeat the MAYDAY call at the beginning of the sequence.

If you hear an unanswered distress message, you must answer. If you are reasonably certain the vessel in distress is not in your area, wait for others to acknowledge. And remember, you may be asked to relay communications between the vessel in distress and the nearest Coast Guard station.

The radio message for urgency is PAN–PAN. Use the PAN–PAN message in situations such as repeating an urgent storm warning or the loss of power or steering in a shipping lane.

Sending the urgency signal and message include the following: The urgency signal, Pan – Pan spoken three times, to all stations or a single station, this is (vessel name) spoken three times. Describe the problem (the message), the position and description of your vessel and any other helpful information. This is (vessel's name) spoken once then the word, OVER.

The radio message for safety is SECURITY which announces a message about safety of navigation or an important weather warning. Safety signals have priority over all other signals except distress and urgency. Most safety messages are initiated by the U.S. Coast Guard on Ch. 16 and given on a working channel such as Ch. 22A. Many skippers prefer to contact the U.S. Coast Guard with the safety information and let the Coast Guard broadcast the safety message.

However, if you do initiate a safety message, use the following as an example. SECURITY, SECURITY, SECURITY, THIS IS (vessel name), SHIFT TO (working channel) FOR SAFETY MESSAGE REGARDING. THIS IS (vessel name) OUT.

On the working channel SECURITY, SECURITY, SECURITY, THIS IS (vessel name). THE MESSAGE ABOUT THE HAZARD TO NAVIGATION INCLUDING ITS POSITION. THIS IS (vessel name), OUT.

Hopefully you will never need to use these distress, urgency or safety messages but there is nothing like being prepared if you do.

Be safe out there and I'll see you on the water.

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